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“ALL THAT YOU HAVE DONE ... HAS BEEN FULLY TOLD TO ME”

THE POWER OF GOSSIP AND THE STORY OF RUTH

Philip F. Esler

Abstract

The literary qualities of the Book of Ruth are a focus of considerable scholarly attention. The aim of this article is to contribute to this research with particular reference to what Boaz says to Ruth, “All that you have done ... has been fully told to me” (2:11), where what he has learned has clearly been in Ruth’s favor. Boaz can only have gained such information through what we call gossip. I will first outline social-scientific research into gossip, which has already been fruitfully applied to various parts of the New Testament.

Secondly, I will discuss informal networks among ancient Israelite women that feature in the way gossip functions in the narrative. Thirdly, I will apply these perspectives to the passages in the text that depend upon gossip’s occurrence. This exercise will substantiate the dictum of anthropologist Robert Paine that “gossip is a catalyst of social process,” by uncovering the remarkable extent to which character is developed, and the plot of the book propelled to its resolution, by gossip.

In recent decades, as one dimension of scholarship on Ruth,¹ the literary qualities of the book have attracted much attention. Of particular interest have been the ways in which its characters are portrayed and relate to one another, issues that inevitably impact upon how the plot is propelled to its resolution.² This article aims to extend the investigation of characterization and plot in Ruth by examining how gossip functions in the unfolding narrative. While gossip in the text has attracted occasional mention,³ my aim is first to set out social-scientific perspectives on gossip and then apply them to the text in its narrative order. Studies using social-scientific ideas on gossip have already illuminated New Testament texts.⁴ This approach will allow me to

¹ For recent approaches to Ruth, see Edward Allen Jones III, *Reading Ruth in the Restoration Period: A Call For Inclusion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 1-9.

² As a sample see: Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth. A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 70-84; Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther*. Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999); Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) and Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2011).

³ For example, Marjo C. A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth*. Pericope 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 126-128 and 132.

⁴ See Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Gossip in the New Testament," in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honor of Bruce J. Malina*, ed. John J. Pilch (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 239-259; Marianne B. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*. BZNW 164 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) and John Daniels, *The Gossiping Jesus: The Oral Processing of Jesus in John's Gospel* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

analyse characterization (especially of Ruth and Boaz) and plot in this Hebrew Bible text within a particular ancient social context, where women were especially prominent, including by their participation in women's networks.

I. SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO GOSSIP

Gossip has attracted interest from social scientists and evolutionary biologists.⁵ Anthropologist David Gilmore, writing in 1978, observed that “gossip as a general category is not one thing or the other, but a diverse range of behaviors all of which have something in common.”⁶ He also commented that “no one has made an effort to break down this catch-all term into its components or to evaluate the meaning of the variability of gossip forms in relation to community social dynamics in general.”⁷ Unfortunately, that remains largely the position today, in spite of some partial efforts at typologising. Indeed, it is probably the case that “gossip does not lend itself to simple formulaic definitions or uniform explanations.”⁸ While everyone has a sense of what gossip is, modelling it is a complex enterprise.⁹ Accordingly, I

⁵ For a review, see Eric K. Foster, “Research on Gossip: Taxonomy, Methods, and Future Directions,” *Review of General Psychology* 8 (2004): 78-99. Robin Dunbar has related gossip to evolutionary biology in *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

⁶ David D. Gilmore, “Varieties of Gossip in a Spanish Rural Community,” *Ethnology* 17 (1978): 89-99, at 89.

⁷ Gilmore, “Varieties,” 89.

⁸ Foster, “Research,” 80.

⁹ Foster, “Research,” 80.

will now draw selectively on social-scientific research to create a profile of gossip that will inform the investigation of the Book of Ruth that follows. By “inform” I mean both posing new questions to the text and also providing an interpretative framework for making sense of the answers, a process akin to “drawing lines between the dots.”

In common parlance and scholarly discourse the core content of gossip is “the exchange of information about absent third parties,” even though on rare occasions the person being discussed may be present.¹⁰ Sometimes such information lacks “valence,” that is, positive or negative evaluations of the person being spoken about. This type of gossip really involves the neutral dissemination of news: who has had a baby, graduated from university, and so on. More commonly the information exchanged about an absent third party is, to some extent at least, evaluative.¹¹

Very often the evaluation will be negative. This was overwhelmingly the case among the population of the Spanish town studied by David Gilmore, where gossip dominated its social life and required eleven different terms to express its diverse forms.¹² That many if not most societies have explicit sanctions against gossip demonstrates a widespread view that gossip has a dark side.¹³ Apart from damaging reputations, it can “steal illusions, wreck relationships, and stir up a cauldron of trouble.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Foster, “Research,” 81.

¹¹ So Foster, “Research,” 82.

¹² Gilmore, “Varieties,” 94-97.

¹³ Foster, “Research,” 78-79.

¹⁴ Ralph L. Rosnow, “Rumor and Gossip in Interpersonal Interaction and Beyond: A Social Exchange Perspective,” in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviours in Interpersonal*

Yet gossip is not always negative in character. Often the evaluations of the absent person aired in the exchange of information are positive. Many researchers have made this point,¹⁵ even though in common parlance gossip tends to carry a negative dimension. Machiavelli's *The Prince* accurately expresses the reality of the phenomenon: "all men, when they are talked about, ... are remarked upon for various qualities which bring them either praise or blame."¹⁶ The fact that gossip can convey a positive view of someone will figure prominently in comprehending the phenomenon in Ruth.

David Gilmore was influenced in his view that gossip consisted of a diverse range of behaviors with something in common by two approaches that emerged among anthropologists in the 1960s and are still significant. First, in 1963 Max Gluckman, adopting a functionalist approach, argued that gossip was a type of spontaneous collective sanction by which public opinion enforced conformity to community values and objectives.¹⁷ In a manner clearly disclosing his focus on the negative dimension of gossip, he noted: "The values of the group are clearly asserted in gossip and scandal, since a man or woman is always run down for failing to live up to these values."¹⁸ One aspect of the social conformity dimension of gossip is that, if it is to be

Relationships, ed. R. M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 203-232, at 203.

¹⁵ See Daena Goldsmith, "Gossip from the Native's Point of View," *Research on Language and Social Intention* 23 (1989):163-193; Rosnow, "Rumor and Gossip;" R. F. Baumeister, L. Zhang and K. D. Vohs, "Gossip as Cultural Learning," *General Review of Psychology* 8 (2004): 111-121; and Foster, "Research," 82 (and the works there cited).

¹⁶ Quoted by Foster, "Research," 82-83.

¹⁷ Max Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 307-16, at 312.

¹⁸ Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," 313.

influential, those involved must agree on the prevailing norms of acceptable behavior and gossipers frequently articulate those norms.¹⁹ Sally Merry has cited considerable evidence to the effect that:

The role of gossip in achieving social control in stable, bounded, morally homogenous, and close-knit societies where escape and avoidance are difficult differs markedly from its function in large, fluid, open, and morally heterogeneous communities where escape and avoidance are realistic possibilities.

The deterrent and control aspects of gossip are much greater in the former type of society,²⁰ which corresponds to the Bethlehem of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz.

The second approach to the subject came in a critique of Gluckman's position from Robert Paine, one of the Newfoundland "transactionalists," from a perspective of methodological individualism.²¹ Paine's rejection of Gluckman's approach is encapsulated in this statement:

It is the individual and not the community that gossips. What he gossips about are his own and others' aspirations, and only indirectly the values

¹⁹ Foster, "Research," 86.

²⁰ Sally Engle Merry, "Rethinking Gossip and Scandal," in *Reputation: Studies in the Voluntary Elucidation of Good Conduct*, ed. Daniel B. Klein (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 47-74, at 48.

²¹ Gilmore, "Varieties," 89.

of the community.²²

Paine argued that gossip was a form of information-management, in particular, a genre of informal communication intended to forward and protect individual interests.²³ Paine asked whether Gluckman's view that the values of the group were asserted in gossip was only true and important "primarily in the sense that individuals appeal to each other in terms of these values in order to forward their own interests."²⁴ He reinforced his belief in the instrumental use of gossip with reference to the way the Sarakatsani (transhumant shepherds of northern Greece) used gossip to cast doubts over other families to improve the claims of their own family to moral recognition.²⁵ This approach allowed Paine to focus on social activity at lower than a community-wide level. He pointed out, for example, that a group often turns out to be "a coterie of rival interest-based quasi-groups,"²⁶ although in my view a better term would be "subgroups." People in subgroups, which have distinct interests, will often need information about people in other subgroups. "Gossip," he reasonably suggested, "is a very general, and important, way of obtaining this information: sometimes it is the only way."²⁷ Much of Paine's

²² Robert Paine, "What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis," *Man* 2 (1967): 278-85, at 280-281.

²³ Paine, "Gossip," 278.

²⁴ Paine, "Gossip," 280.

²⁵ Paine, "Gossip," 281, citing J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 265, 280-281, 286 and 315.

²⁶ Paine, "Gossip," 282.

²⁷ Paine, "Gossip," 282.

conclusion is worth quoting:

In this view of gossip, there is no *a priori* assumption that gossip of itself either avoids conflict or exacerbates it, that is brings people together or pushes them into opposing factions. It may have implications in either or both of these directions. On the other hand, I think it can be demonstrated that gossip is a catalyst of social process, so that one or another of the effects just mentioned is likely to be produced.²⁸

In 1978 David Gilmore found truth in both of these positions. Unfortunately, the two approaches “had hardened into competing interpretations instead of being thought of as complementary approaches to a phenomenon which obviously has both communicative and social-control dimensions.”²⁹ He considered Gluckman and Paine were both right, for they were talking about different forms of gossip, not about gossip as a general category. Gilmore argued that Gluckman had focused on “collective gossip,” meaning the “moral indictment by the entire community” that had only “a minimal ‘communicative’ significance.”³⁰ Gilmore’s use of “indictment” rather than a more neutral term such as “evaluation” reflected his experience of gossip in the Spanish town where gossip was always derogatory. Paine, on the other hand, had been speaking of “small group gossip,” which was “‘newsy’ communication exchanged informally by individuals within pre-

²⁸ Paine, “Gossip,” 283.

²⁹ Gilmore, “Varieties,” 89.

³⁰ Gilmore, “Varieties,” 98.

existing social networks.”³¹ Similarly, in 1997 Sally Merry observed that:

Gluckman’s and Paine’s perspectives are not mutually exclusive but complementary. One looks at the functions gossip performs for social groups, the other at the motivations for actors to engage in gossiping. Neither perspective alone is adequate.³²

When investigating Ruth we will discover that both forms of gossip are found there, but that Paine’s approach illuminates more of the data.

Another aspect of gossip relevant to the Book of Ruth is its function in promoting friendship or intimacy. This occurs both in dyadic exchanges but also when gossip has the effect of bringing groups together through the sharing of norms that establishes “boundaries to distinguish insiders from outsiders.”³³ Gossip is probably more common between friends than between casual acquaintances or strangers “because shared social meanings and history are essential to understanding the subtleties of the gossip.”³⁴ This issue of shared social meanings brings us to the next section of this article.

II. INFORMAL NETWORKS AMONG ANCIENT ISRAELITE WOMEN

³¹ Gilmore, “Varieties,” 98.

³² Sally Engle Merry, “Rethinking Gossip and Scandal,” in *Reputation: Studies in the Voluntary Elucidation of Good Conduct*, ed. Daniel B. Klein (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 47-74, at 50.

³³ Foster, “Research,” 85.

³⁴ Foster, “Research,” 85, and the works cited there.

The importance of women in Ruth necessitates considering a particular social pattern among ancient Israelite women. In 1999 Carol Meyers invoked recent research showing that women in non-Western settings and in pre-modern farming households played a far more ample social role than had previously been believed.³⁵ This reappraisal entailed problematizing the widely accepted dichotomy between the public realm (of the large social unit, especially villages and towns) and the domestic/private realm (of the family unit), where men and women were respectively dominant.³⁶ In fact, in most village-based societies, including ancient Israel, the lines between such spheres are blurred. This research meant that “Public and private are thus overlapping and integrated domains in many aspects of family and community life in traditional societies.”³⁷ Meyers also pointed out that decades of ethnographic research had shown that women in peasant societies are invariably connected to each other via a series of informal relationships often designated as “women’s networks.”³⁸ She summons

³⁵ Carol Meyers, “‘Women of the Neighborhood’ (Ruth 4:7): Informal Female Networks in Ancient Israel,” in Brenner, ed., *Ruth and Esther*, 110-127.

³⁶ For the old view, see M. Z. Rosaldo, “Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview,” in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 17-42. For the new view, see Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, eds., *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Janet Sharistanian, *Beyond the Public/Domestic Dichotomy: Contemporary Perspectives on Women’s Public Lives*. Contributions to Women’s Studies, 78. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987).

³⁷ Meyers, “Women,” 115.

³⁸ Especially cited by Meyers, “Women,” 116-119, are V. Maher, “Kin, Clients, and Accomplices: Relationships among Women in Morocco,” in *Sexual Divisions and Society*:

evidence for such informal networks among women having existed in ancient Israel, with a compelling example in the Book of Ruth as we will see below. Katherine Southwood has recently agreed with Meyers on this issue and aptly cites the comment of Alice Ostriker that “Ruth is the only book of the Bible that gives us a hint of a women’s community and social life existing alongside yet distinct from male society.”³⁹ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes even argued that the book of Ruth was itself the product of collaboration between a tradition of wise women narrators and a predominantly female audience.⁴⁰

In applying these insights to ancient Israel, Meyers noted that women, married ones at least, had an advantage over men in being connected both to their natal and marital families/descent groups.⁴¹ The links that women retained with their birth families were often vital to their lives in the families and communities into which they had married.⁴² While Meyers recognized that the existence of regular female contact across households allowed women’s networks to share information, the only example she proffered for

Process and Change, eds. D. L. Barber and S. Allen. *Explorations in Sociology*, 6 (London: Tavistock, 1976), 52-75, at 52-53, and K. S. March and R. L. Taquq, *Women’s Informal Associations in Developing Countries*. *Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1986).

³⁹ Katherine E. Southwood, “Will Naomi’s Nation be Ruth’s Nation?: Ethnic Translation as a Metaphor for Ruth’s Assimilation within Judah,” *Humanities* 3 (2014): 102–131, fn. 108, p. 131, citing Alice S. Striker, *For the Love of God: The Bible as an Open Book* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 41.

⁴⁰ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, “Ruth: A Product of Women’s Culture?,” in *The Feminist Companion to Ruth*, *supra*, 134-139.

⁴¹ Meyers, “Women,” 117-118.

⁴² Meyers, “Women,” 118.

this process was where women became aware of acute labor needs in a household caused by the illness or absence of family members.⁴³

More recently, Marianne Kartzow has provided further examples of information sharing among ancient Jewish women from the Mishnah. First, she mentions an account of how hardworking women who “spin by moonlight” formed (and communicated) a view as to whether another woman had committed adultery or not.⁴⁴ Secondly, she discusses the account of how women who visit the bathhouse were a useful source of information as to whether a particular woman they saw there had physical flaws that would affect her value as a marriage partner.⁴⁵ In both of these examples women were communicating information interesting to themselves but also useful to men, husbands in the first case and prospective husbands and their families in the second.

III. APPLICATION TO THE TEXT

Naomi, Ruth and Orpah (1:1-18)

Chapter 1 of Ruth sets out basic information about Naomi and her immediate family (natal and affinal) and their movements between Bethlehem in Judah and Moab. But it also provides critical insights into social dynamics among women in this context and into Ruth’s character that will heavily influence the way the plot develops. No assumptions are made here about the historicity of

⁴³ Meyers, “Women,” 123.

⁴⁴ Kartzow, *Gossip*, 104-108.

⁴⁵ Kartzow, *Gossip*, 104-110 (citing *mSotah* 6.1 and *mKetubot* 7.8).

this story; statements concerning events relate to how the story would have been understood by its original audience in their social world.

We must first look at the broad social situation that an ancient Israelite audience would have discerned in the text. Elimelech and Naomi, with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, left Bethlehem during a famine, travelled to Moab “and they were there” (M#-wyhyw; 1:1-2).⁴⁶ Such an audience would probably have interpreted this to mean that they had acquired a house and taken up farming, the dominant economic activity.⁴⁷ Then Elimelech died, leaving Naomi and her two sons. Naomi and her sons presumably went on working the land. Then the sons married Moabite women, one called Orpah (her husband probably Mahlon) and the second (probably the younger) called Ruth (her husband probably Chilion).

Ten years elapsed and then Naomi’s two sons died. Unstated but implied in the text is that neither Ruth nor Orpah had produced any children, even after ten years of marriage. It is interesting that neither son had married a second wife in the hope of producing children. One might expect this to be a rather tense household. In a social context characterized by patrilineality and patrilocality, a wife suffers the loneliness of having left her natal family and must come under the authority of, and build relationships with, her new

⁴⁶ Hebrew translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

⁴⁷ Far less plausibly the Targum amplifies the elliptic M#-wyhyw of the MT by stating they had been “lords” (Nynbr) in Bethlehem and were “governors” (Nylpwr; from Latin *rufuli*) in Moab! See D. R. G. Beattie, *The Targum of Ruth: Translated, with Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 18.

relatives.⁴⁸ Sometimes the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can be difficult,⁴⁹ and a daughter-in-law who has not produced a son would be in a worse position. Upon the birth of her first son, a daughter-in-law's status in the house improves greatly.⁵⁰ The failure of Ruth and Orpah to produce children negatively impacted the family's capacity to run a farm and support itself. Yet this factor did not sour relations between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law here, as might have been expected. As the story develops, we observe close emotional bonds between these three women related by marriage that set the scene for informal women's networks to appear later in the text.

But what about the birth families of Ruth and Orpah? As already noted, married women could and did keep in touch with their natal families. Yet that process presupposes geographical proximity, with both families in the same village or in villages not too far apart (as probably to be understood here). This issue of staying in touch is implied in the text. Initially, with her husband and sons dead, we learn that when she heard that famine was over in Judah, "Naomi rose and her daughters-in-law with her and she began to return from the country of Moab" (1:6). But Naomi took no action at this point to send her daughters-in-law back to their families. Only when they had come away from the place (in Moab) where they had been living and "were travelling along the

⁴⁸ For a graphic description of the position of daughters-in-law among the patrilineal and patrilocal Sarakatsani, see Campbell, *Honour*, 59-69.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *Honour*, 64: "The bride takes most of her orders from her mother-in-law under whose critical and watchful direction she works."

road to return to the land of Judah” (1:7) did it occur to Naomi to send them home.

Accordingly, she suggested they return to their mothers’ houses, so that God might reward their kindness to their late husbands and to her by giving them fulfilment in life, here, as naturally in this context, identified with marriage, or “finding rest (*hxwnm*) in the house of a husband” (1:8-9). That Naomi refers to their mothers’ houses and not their fathers is noteworthy, since both of Ruth’s parents were still alive at this time (2:11). Probably an ancient reader would have understood that Naomi mentioned their mothers because they were the relatives most likely to compensate for their leaving her. But perhaps we should imagine that Naomi knew them personally, from attending the weddings of Ruth and Orpah perhaps. In any event, the story is being told from the women’s point of view. Nevertheless, the narrator insinuates Naomi’s slowness in coming to terms with the difficult situation of her daughters-in-law in her only seeking to send them home at the last moment.

The close emotional bond between these women appears in her kissing them goodbye and in their weeping and protesting that they did not wish to leave her (1:10). While this may seem unsurprising to us, it may well have been surprising in antiquity given that these two women had failed to give Naomi any grandsons or granddaughters. Naomi next provided the specific reason for them to go home, namely, that she neither had nor would have other sons for them to marry (1:11-13). She implied that if they returned

⁵⁰ Upon the arrival of a bride’s first child among the Sarakatsani, the attitude of the whole extended family towards the bride “shifts from tolerance to acceptance and affection for her as the mother of their tiny kinsman” (Campbell, *Honour*, 69).

home, however, they could then find Moabite husbands. This seemed the only factor in Naomi's mind; the fact that once back with their families they would also have found help with lodging and subsistence—in a way that Naomi may have found difficult to provide—passes unnoticed in the text.

The good social sense in Naomi's advice was evident to Orpah, who, having kissed Naomi, returned home (1:14). The fact that she only did so after hearing Naomi's advice and not earlier, for example, upon the death of her husband or before they had started out on the journey to Judah, shows the depth of her devotion to her mother-in-law.⁵¹

Yet while Orpah's behavior was unusual, Ruth's response was remarkably so. She clung to Naomi when Orpah left (1:14) and resisted Naomi's warning that she should follow her sister-in-law and return to "to her people and to her god" (1:15). The words Ruth uttered to Naomi when explaining why she could not follow Orpah are widely familiar (1:16-17). Nevertheless, we tend to miss their full force because we underestimate how unlikely was Ruth's response in its ancient context and how unambiguously not motivated by a sense of personal self-preservation in a setting where women almost invariably sought fulfilment through marriage and giving birth to children. Some modern interpreters find the book disconcerting for this very reason.⁵²

⁵¹ For a nuanced and sympathetic discussion of Orpah's decision, see Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 48-50. For a harsher view, see Ruth Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 48.

⁵² See the discussion by Cheryl B. Anderson, "Ruth and Esther as Models of the Formation of God's People: Engaging Liberationist Critiques," in *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial*

Let us look at Ruth's words *seriatim*:

- A. "Do not entreat me to leave you and to return from following you,
- B. for wherever you go, I will go,
- C. wherever you lodge, I will lodge.
- D. Your people (כְּמִי) will be my people (יְמִי),
- E. and your God my God.
- F. Wherever you die, I will die and there will I be buried.
- G. May Yahweh do this to me and more as well, if even death should
separate us."

Clauses A. and B. signal Ruth's abandonment of her natal family and the husband it could provide her in favor of her marital family embodied (at this stage) solely in Naomi. But it also conveys her forfeiting the security to be found where her birth relatives reside for a possible life on the move with her mother-in-law. While it later emerges that Naomi retained some property in

Bethlehem, there is no indication that Ruth knew about it at this time. The point is solidified in Clause C. with its expression of Ruth's willingness to lodge, that is, to make an overnight stay, wherever Naomi does.

In Clauses D. and E. Ruth responds to Naomi's recommendation that she return to "her people and to her god" (1:15) by insisting that (henceforward) Naomi's people and God are her people and God. How are we to explain this? In spite of Mark Smith's argument, developing an earlier idea of Tikva Frymer-Kensky,⁵³ these words have nothing to do with covenant or agreement. Superficial similarity of language should not distract us from the basic difference in the two situations: a covenant needs both parties to agree and to form some new entity. But here Naomi does nothing, while Ruth does everything. It is also wrong to see here a religious "conversion."⁵⁴ As long ago as 1988, before the discussion of ethnic identity had become common in biblical scholarship, Adele Berlin providently suggested that Ruth was engaged in a change of identity, from Moabite to Israelite: "Religion was bound up with ethnicity in biblical times; each people had its land and gods (cf. Mic 4:5), so that to change religion meant to change nationality."⁵⁵ Biblical

⁵³ Mark S. Smith, "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17," *CBQ* 69 (2007): 242-258. At p. 246 he cites Frymer-Kensky's notion that the words of Ruth's speech "resonate with the Bible's cadence of covenant and contract." See her *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), p. 241.

⁵⁴ This is a common interpretation: see Smith, "'Your People Shall be My People,'" at 243-245.

⁵⁵ Adele Berlin, "Ruth," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 262-267, at 263. Another scholar who has recognized that Judean and

research since then often cites the typical indicators of ethnic identity as formulated by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith: (a) a common proper name for the group; (b) a myth of common ancestry; (c) a shared history; (d) a common culture, embracing customs, language and religious phenomena; (e) a link with a homeland, and (f) a sense of communal solidarity.⁵⁶ Religious phenomena thus form only one part of six possible indicators of the more inclusive ethnic identity. The social pattern in view is a movement from one ethnic identity, Moabite, to another, Israelite—not a religious conversion—even though both ethnic identities have a strong religious dimension.

Katherine Southwood has astutely described Ruth's movement in the text as one of "ethnic translation" and Naomi's as one of "ethnic re-translation."⁵⁷

Some centuries after Ruth was written, Philo described the process of becoming a Judean in unmistakably ethnic terms (*De virtutibus*, 102-103).⁵⁸ It is also mistaken to treat the word מ (as meaning only "family" or "clan," as Mark Smith does.⁵⁹ The מ is predominantly the Judean ethnic group that is implied throughout the narrative and becomes explicit with mention of the "House of Israel" in Ruth 4:11-12. The מ, people or ethnic group, of Israel, with its God, stands in contrast to the מ, or the people or ethnic group, of Moab (1:15), with its gods. Moab is a people living on its homeland (1:2, 6,

Moabite ethnic identities were in play is Victor H. Matthews, in "The Determination of Social identity in the Story of Ruth," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006): 49–54, at 51.

⁵⁶ John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, eds. *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-14, at 6-7.

⁵⁷ Southwood, "Will Naomi's Nation be Ruth's Nation?"

⁵⁸ See my discussion in *God's Court and Courtiers in the Book of the Watchers: Re-interpreting Heaven in 1 Enoch 1-36* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), at ???.

22), which is ethnic indicator (e) above. Moreover, Boaz distinguishes the land of Moab from Ruth's "mother and father" in 2:11. Ruth's natal ethnic identity is evoked whenever she is called a Moabitess (1:4, 22; 2:6; 4:5, 10).

Clause F. carries the affirmation that the commitment expressed in the previous four statements is life-long. Thus Ruth gives up the family, people and god of her birth and deliberately attaches herself instead to the family or clan, people and God of Naomi. We witness Ruth at the very moment that she eloquently and momentously declares her adoption of new familial, ethnic and religious identities. In Clause G. she emphasizes the irrevocability of her choice immediately after this by making operational—in the dramatic form of a curse—the attachment she has just expressed to the God of Israel. Seeing such determination, Naomi, unsurprisingly, says nothing more (1:18).

Ruth 1:16-17 thus contain an extraordinary succession of loyalty statements, not least loyalty to Israel's God. The work provides no explanation for why Ruth adopts this position. It is just a *donnée* of the text. She was an extraordinary person and this is her story!

The Return to Bethlehem (1:19-21)

The return of Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem elicited quite a response: $\text{Nhy} \text{ l } (\text{ ry } (\text{ h-lk } \text{ Mhtw } (1:19)$. Here the Hebrew word Mht requires analysis. The initial question is whether it derives from Mwh (or the closely related form Mmh) or hmh .⁶⁰ If it represents the imperfect niphal of Mwh or Mmh (either is

⁵⁹ Smith, "Your People Shall be My People," 257.

⁶⁰ See Paul Joüon S.J., *Ruth: Commentaire philologique et exégétique*. Deuxieme edition (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986), 43 and Jones, *Ruth*, 29.

grammatically possible), the primary reference, according to David Clines (who treats the verb as a form of *M_{wh}*), is to people being stirred, or in uproar or distraught.⁶¹ Lisowsky, similarly, favors *M_{wh}* and offers “*verwirren* / to stir, to discomfit / *perturbare*.”⁶² BDB has “be in a stir.”⁶³ H. –P. Müller suggests the reference is “to the panic brought about by human uproar or by dismaying news.”⁶⁴ Yet this is a little too negative, since the words can also refer to the excitement or uproar occasioned by a happy event, such as its use in relation to the earth’s reaction to Israel’s shouting when the ark arrived in the camp (1 Sam 4:5) or the response of Jerusalem to the shouts of Solomon’s supporters when he is anointed king (1 Kings 4:5). So we are talking about a group of people being stirred or excited, but where noise is produced. It is less likely that *M_{ht}* represents the niphal of *h_mh*, since the niphal of this verb is not otherwise attested in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁵ If this is the underlying verb, however, the stress would fall more on the acoustic dimension of the event, its noisiness, with associations of tumult and confusion.⁶⁶ This meaning is less appropriate than uproar over what was perceived to be a stirring or exciting but yet essentially positive event. Thus, I follow most lexicons in

⁶¹ David J. A. Clines (ed), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew. Volume II. b–w* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 504.

⁶² Gerhard Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament*. Second edition (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1958), 381.

⁶³ F. Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 223.

⁶⁴ See H. –P. Müller, “*M_mh h_mn*; *M_{wh} h_wm*,” etc., *TDOT*, 3:419-422, at 422.

⁶⁵ It is always in the Qal: see Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 426, and A. Baumann, “*h_mh*,” etc., *TDOT*, 3:414-418, at 414.

⁶⁶ Baumann, “*h_mh*,” 415.

regarding the verb as *M_{wh}* and suggest “was in noisy uproar” as an appropriate translation.

The arrival of Naomi and Ruthe, presumably at the town gate (see 4:1), inevitably caused quite a stir and commotion—for two unaccompanied women, one of them old and a younger one, still of child-bearing age had unexpectedly appeared. As a crowd gathered around, people must have been wondering: “Who are they? Where have they come from and why are they here?” For that they were not immediately recognized, and that it took at least a moment for some realization to dawn, emerge in the question: “And the women asked, ‘Is this Naomi?’” The Midrash suggested she looked different because she was sickly from hunger.⁶⁷ The women cannot have been expecting her. That Naomi had not been in touch with them while in Moab is evident from her learning the famine had ended in Judah because she heard this in Moab (1:6), not because someone from Bethlehem had gotten word to her.

We must imagine men, women and children gathering to witness their arrival. That among this whole group it is *the women* who recognise Naomi is a highly significant aspect of her homecoming (1:19): “And they (feminine plural) asked, ‘Is this Naomi?’” Carol Meyers rightly recognises behind this question an instance of informal networks such as she argues were widespread in ancient Israel.⁶⁸ Naomi was someone whom the Bethlehem women once knew well and often talked with, perhaps around a well, or common bread-oven, or spinning, or in the other tasks that women shared.

⁶⁷ James McKeown, *Ruth*. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 33.

⁶⁸ Meyers, “Women,” 120.

Their surprised recognition of Naomi—whom they had not seen in ten years since she left Bethlehem with her husband and their two sons and who has now returned without them but with a young woman—must have provoked intense curiosity on their part. LaCocque’s remark, that: “In their return to Judah, the Judean women welcome Naomi, but Ruth passes unnoticed,”⁶⁹ does not really capture the women’s response. The whole town had been stirred up “concerning them” (Nhy1 (;1:19), that is, by the arrival of both of them, not just Naomi. Ruth had certainly been noticed. Not only is their question “Is this Naomi?” not yet a welcome, since it is uttered amongst themselves and not directed to Naomi (yet which Naomi overheard), but it also reflects the fact that doubt attended their recognition even of Naomi.

Naomi immediately moved to answer their curiosity as to whether this really was her. Yet she did so in a very negative and, at this point, very general way, and talking not to the townsfolk at large but only to the women who alone had recognized her:

And she said to them (Nhy1 (), “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has brought calamity upon me (1:20-21).”

This statement would have raised as many questions as answers in the minds of the women present. They would certainly have wanted to discover the nature of and reason for the bitterness and calamity that Naomi had

⁶⁹ André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, edited by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 27.

mentioned, but also the identity of the young woman accompanying her and the circumstances of her doing so. But this is all the text reports that Naomi said to them on this occasion, with the next verse simply rehearsing their return from Moab and that it occurred at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Fewell and Gunn take it amiss of Naomi that she says nothing about Ruth at this point.⁷⁰ How can Naomi say she is returning empty when she has an extraordinarily devoted daughter-in-law at her side? But this is probably to take too modern a view of the situation, to condemn Naomi with respect to a view on the position of women not current in her social context. Like other women in her culture, Naomi's life had revolved around the men in her life, her husband and her sons. Without a man like this in her life the prospects for her and, it must be stressed, for her daughter-in-law, were bleak indeed. That is why she said she came home empty and that the Lord had brought calamity upon her.

At this point the issue of gossip, especially among the women of Bethlehem, comes into its own. Any ancient audience of this text would have assumed that Naomi later communicated to the women, either singly or in a group, the full story of her tragic experience in Moab and the reason for Ruth's arrival with her and that this knowledge then spread throughout Bethlehem. This will be confirmed as the story proceeds.

The First Two Encounters Between Boaz and Ruth (2:1-17)

⁷⁰ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising*, 75-76.

Although the narrator tells us that Naomi had a wealthy kinsman related to her husband named Boaz (2:1), for some reason Naomi (if she knew) did not tell Ruth about him. She had the opportunity to mention Boaz to Ruth when she agreed to her going out to glean but failed to do so, which was surprising given that Ruth was interested in catching the attention of some man in the process (2:2). This is confirmed by that fact that it happened by chance, not by her intention, that Ruth gleaned in Boaz' fields (2:3) and by the later mention of Boaz by Naomi (2:20). When Boaz came from Bethlehem (2:4), he asked the overseer in charge of the reapers, with reference to Ruth, "To whom does this young woman belong?" (2:5). The overseer's answer is worth noting: "The young woman is the Moabitess who returned with Naomi from the country of Moab" (2:6). He then added that she had sought his permission to glean and she had been doing so since morning (2:7).⁷¹

How had the overseer learned Ruth's identity? Three possibilities present themselves: either from gossip in Bethlehem before she arrived in his master's fields, or from Ruth when she sought his permission to glean, or a mixture of both. Since he does not say that he asked Ruth who she was or that she told him, the more likely source of his information was gossip plus his assumption that this woman, perhaps hitherto unknown to him, who asked to glean could only be the Moabitess newly arrived in the town. The overseer says nothing negative of Ruth to Boaz; indeed he provides the apparently positive report that she has been gleaning since early morning. Equally, he

⁷¹ See McKeown, *Ruth*, 43-44, for a plausible argument (based largely on 2:3) that 2:7 does not mean Ruth had been standing round all day but not gleaning. Fewell and Gunn (1990: 35), in a less likely interpretation, suggest the overseer did not permit Ruth to start gleaning.

had heard nothing negative about her that would have led him to refuse her request to glean. It is significant that Boaz does not ask his overseer for any further details. We will soon learn that this is because he is already in possession of them, in their entirety.

Although unmentioned in the text at this stage, it emerges from what follows (2:9) that at this point, before speaking to Ruth, Boaz gave instructions that his servants were not to molest her and should permit her to drink from his pitchers of water. In other words, as soon as he realized who this young woman was, Boaz sprang into purposive action to assist her. Only later will we learn what had motivated this immediate and solicitous concern for the Moabitess.

There next occurs a critical interaction, the first in the narrative between Boaz and Ruth (2:8-13). Taking the initiative, Boaz begins rather abruptly. Addressing her as “my daughter,” he tells her only to glean in his fields and with his servants, whom he has ordered not to molest her, and to drink from his pitchers of water (2:8-9). Although Boaz has not told Ruth who he is, this message informs her that he is the owner of these fields and that he is a wealthy man who can afford servants to harvest them.

Faced with this sudden and utterly unexpected profusion of good will from someone clearly of wealth and influence, Ruth, not surprisingly, falls on her face, bows herself to the ground and asks him the very natural question (2:10), “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should have regard for me, me, a foreigner?” Boaz’ reply uncovers the motivation behind his attitude and actions towards her:

All that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death

has been fully told to me, and that you left your father and your mother and the land where you were born and you came to a people that you did not know before. May Yahweh reward your actions, and may a full recompense be made to you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge (2:11-12).

Above all, Boaz knows what Ruth said to Naomi when insisting that she would follow her (1:16-17), that is, everything in Clauses A, B, C, D and E set out above. That she intended dying and being buried wherever Naomi was (Clause F) flows naturally from this. But Boaz knows more about Ruth than this. In referring to everything that she did for Naomi after her husband's death, Boaz evokes the period preceding their departure for Judah. Rather than simply leaving Naomi and returning home when Chilion died, a natural thing to do in this context, Ruth had stayed with Naomi, no doubt assisting her, *before* their journey to Judah. Boaz relies on this particular information in forming an opinion of Ruth. It is true that "Für Boas ist sie deshalb nicht mehr einfach 'eine Ausländerin.'" ⁷² Nevertheless, there is no sign he regards Ruth favorably because she is like Abraham (Genesis 12) and Rebekah (Gen. 24:4, 7), who left their own homeland to go to a foreign country. ⁷³ In addition, it is sometimes it is suggested that Boaz' interest in Ruth has been prompted

⁷² Erich Zenger, *Das Buch Ruth*. Zürcher Bibelkommentare (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992), 56.

⁷³ This has been suggested by Marjo C. A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth*. Pericope, Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity, II (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 126.

by his sexual attraction to her.⁷⁴ This, however, goes beyond, and runs against, the evidence.

More needs to be said about Boaz than this, however. The expression “has been fully explained (dgahu dgEehu; *hugêd hugad*) to me,” with the hophal and the infinitive absolute, is striking. The hophal of dgn (*nagad*) is used of gossip in Gen 38:13, where Tamar was told (probably by another woman) that Judah had gone off to the sheep-shearing. The only other instance in the MT of the hophal of dgn together with the infinitive absolute is at Jos 9:24—where it refers to reliable knowledge, namely, the Gibeonites’ certainty that Yahweh would give the whole country to the Israelites following Joshua’s capture of Jericho and Ai. Here my translation “fully explained” is meant to convey an explanation that is both detailed and reliable. It suggests that Boaz has gone out of his way to gain all the accurate information about Ruth that he possibly could. She has struck him as someone exceptionally loyal to Naomi and her family, to Israel and to Israel’s God. Lurking in the background here is the notion of dsx, a rich concept meaning faithful and devoted loyalty and kindness (in relationships and covenants), a concept Boaz will expressly invoke in relation to her conduct later.

We are probably meant to understand that once Boaz had heard the broad facts of the return of Naomi and Ruth he went out of his way to learn the whole story. It is beyond doubt that he was captivated by what he heard, including the fact that Ruth had chosen Yahweh as her God. He regarded her as a person of outstanding inner beauty, whatever she may have looked like. The fact that nothing is said about Ruth’s physical appearance in this text now falls into place: that issue was irrelevant to how Boaz regarded her.

⁷⁴ See Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising*, 40-41.

Boaz must have known that sooner or later he was going to encounter Ruth. Bethlehem was a village after all. He must, moreover, have been looking forward to meeting the woman about whom he knew so much and whose character, especially the loyalty that typified it, he so admired. Probably he guessed who this woman was—someone he had never met before in so small a place as Bethlehem—even before his overseer told him her identity.

As soon as we ask how it was that Boaz came by this all-important information about Ruth, we enter the realm of gossip, as profiled above. The foundational dimension of gossip is present: Ruth is an absent third party about whom other people have been exchanging information. Moreover, the information possessed valence. It was not just the neutral dissemination of news about the arrival of the Moabitess with her mother-in-law and the specifics of Ruth's behavior, attitudes and dispositions, but it also extended to an evaluation of them. There is no sign that the evaluation assigned to Ruth was anything other than positive. While much gossip is negative in character, the situation of Ruth represents one of those cases when it is positive.

Just as David Gilmore and Sally Merry saw virtue in Max Gluckman's functionalist approach to the diverse phenomenon of gossip and Robert Paine's transactionalist perspective, both views of gossip assist in elucidating what happened in Bethlehem in relation to Ruth. Gluckman regarded gossip as a collective sanction by which public opinion enforced conformity to community values and objectives as articulated by the gossipers. This meant that the action gossiped about was likely to be regarded as a transgression against those values and objectives. We will see data comparable with this later in the text. Ruth's case is different, however. One certainly encounters a

strong sense of community values implied, even articulated, in Boaz' attitude to her. In a setting where group-belonging was important, Boaz and his informants, to whom we will return below, valorize loyalty to family, people and God as the fundamental values. In doing so they must be regarded as representative of wider Israelite opinion. In this respect they are comparable to Gluckman's approach. Yet the big difference comes in that they do not see Ruth as failing to live up to these values, with gossip about her as a means to bring her into line, but rather they regard her as embodying them and as worthy of praise in consequence. They exchange information about the absent Ruth not negatively because she is a threat to their community's values but laud her because she, a Moabitess of all people, is prototypical of them.

Robert Paine's argument that gossip constituted a form of information-management, a genre of informal communication intended to forward and protect individual interests, also resonates with the information exchanged about Ruth. In Paine's view, gossip, is not necessarily either conducive to, or destructive of, community cohesion, bringing people together or pushing them apart. It can and probably does have either effect, but it will do so by individuals using it to their advantage. This is how it serves as a catalyst of social process.

Paine's ideas cohere quite closely with phenomena in the text. As the narrative advances, it is difficult to believe that Boaz has attended so closely to gossip about Ruth in order to engage with her merely as a proponent or enforcer of public opinion and social order. Even at this early stage he is more than someone who is just a mouthpiece for the community in telling her how closely she aligns with its values. Rather, he is captivated with her for the

reason set out above and this motivates his direct personal interest in her.

We have confirmation later that he was attracted to Ruth but assumed he was too old for her, when he thanked her for showing him kindness (דִּסַּח) and for “not going after young men, poor or rich” (3:10). He must have expected she would not be interested in him, wealthy or not, because of his age. His engagement with gossip about Ruth thus becomes the key way in which he learns enough about her to begin a relationship that will result in their marriage. In other words, he is using gossip to further his own interests, but also those of the sub-group represented by himself, Naomi and Ruth.

But what was the ultimate source of Boaz’ knowledge about Ruth? Marjo Korpel provides an answer that is correct but only as far as it goes: “The unnamed source of his information is obviously village-gossip...”⁷⁵ We can dig more deeply with reference to the informal women’s networks described by Meyers. We have seen that, at the moment of her return to Bethlehem with Ruth, Naomi spoke to the women of the town whom she knew previously, not to the men. While this is Meyers’ first evidence in the text for women’s networks, she also provides a second example.⁷⁶ Near the end of the text, after Ruth had borne a son, the women spoke to Naomi, praising Yahweh for the child’s birth and its benefits (4:14). Then “the women who were her neighbors (תִּנְּכָה),” uniquely in the Hebrew Bible, named the child Obed (4:17).⁷⁷ The conclusion flowing from this data is that Naomi was very

⁷⁵ Korpel, *Ruth*, 126. Although he does not mention gossip as the mechanism, McKeown reasonably suggests that Boaz could only have heard about Ruth from information that Naomi had shared with others (*Ruth*, 47).

⁷⁶ Meyers, “Women,” 120.

⁷⁷ Meyers, “Women,” 120.

close indeed to the women of Bethlehem, that they formed a network (or even networks) of the type described by Meyers. The information about Ruth was released into the community through Naomi speaking to the women, either at large, or, more plausibly, to those women who were her immediate neighbors. With the latter she was on such intimate terms that it would be they who named Ruth's son.

Yet the information had to move from at least one of these women to Boaz. When he says that everything Ruth did had been fully told to him, the person doing the telling must have been one of these women. This situation thus becomes intriguingly close to the cases (noted above) that Marianne Kartzow has identified in the Mishnah, where women (either those who spin together or visit bathhouses) provide information concerning other women to men who have a direct interest in it. Here the information was positive in nature: the woman must have passed on to Boaz the high praise of Ruth that Naomi had communicated to her. It is essential to observe for the argument of this article that gossip had produced the initially favorable impression that Boaz formed of Ruth and that prompted him to assist her.

One opacity in the text is whether we are meant to assume that Boaz knew he was a kinsman of Naomi's by marriage, a member of her husband, Elimelech's clan, when he was talking to Ruth, a fact he failed to mention to her. Given that he had so carefully obtained information about her, we should probably assume that Boaz did know this.

Ruth gracefully and humbly thanked Boaz for what he arranged for her, addressing him as *ynd*) ("my lord"; 2:13). Although she learned the name of the man in whose fields she had been gleaning during that day, she did not know at that stage that he had any connection with her.

Later that day, at mealtime, on what was their second encounter, Boaz gave Ruth food, so that she ate till she was satisfied and had some food left over (2:14). He also instructed his servants to let her glean directly among the sheaves, leaving ears of grain specifically for her. She went home with an ephah of barley and showed Naomi the food and the barley (2:17-18). All of this testifies to the partiality Boaz showed Ruth as a result of what he had learned about her via the medium of gossip. Boaz' generosity also pricked Naomi's curiosity; she wanted to know who was the man whose eye Ruth had caught and Ruth told her it was a man called Boaz (2:19). Only at this point (as noted above) did Naomi tell Ruth that Boaz was a relative of theirs with a right of redemption over them (2:19-20).

Boaz' Third Encounter with Ruth, on the Threshing-Floor (3:6-15)

The third meeting between Boaz and Ruth occurred because Naomi decided it would be appropriate for Ruth and Boaz, her kinsman, to marry. The unorthodox means Naomi chose to initiate this plan was for Ruth to sleep under Boaz's blanket on the threshing-floor and to do what he said (3:1-5). Why Naomi simply did not negotiate with Boaz so as to conclude a marital contract is unclear. Her plan really constituted an elaborate device for Ruth to tell Boaz she would marry him. In any event, Ruth carried out the plan and Boaz awoke with a start to find a woman lying at his feet (3:6-8). It has been suggested she was naked,⁷⁸ but this is inconsistent with her dressing up

⁷⁸ For example, see Nielsen, *Ruth*, 74.

for Boaz but keeping out of his sight till she lay at his feet (3:3). He asked who she was and Ruth told him, while also reminding him (we soon see he already knew) that was her kin, thus implying that he had a right of redemption over her (3:9). His response illustrates once again the power of gossip in propelling the plot of this narrative:

And he said, “May you be blessed by Yahweh, my daughter; for this latter act of faithful kindness (*dsx*) you have done is greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich (3:10). And now, my daughter, do not fear, I will do for you everything that you ask, for all the people in my town know that you are a woman of good character (*lyx t#*); 3:11).”

In v. 10 Boaz is aligning Ruth’s kindness and loyalty in the past to Naomi—presumably by not abandoning her for another husband in Moab after her first husband died—with how she has now behaved to him, by not forsaking him for a young man. The use of *dsx*, a quality connected with loyalty and highly valued by Boaz as implied in his conversation with her in the field as noted above, is closely connected with the fact that he is a kinsman, to whom loyalty is especially appropriate.

But the next verse makes manifest the power of gossip in the town and the sway it holds over him. It matters greatly to Boaz that the people of Bethlehem all think highly of her. Although this is an unusual use of *lyx*, it does convey the meaning proposed above.⁷⁹ At Prov 4:5 it introduces a

⁷⁹ Note Joüon, *Ruth*, 74: “*lyx* ici au sens de *force morale*, lat. *virtus*, *vertu*.”

eulogy of a wife of noble character.⁸⁰ Among the population of Bethlehem are to be numbered the women of the town who, near the end of the text, express to Naomi, another woman, one aspect of Ruth's admirable character: "Your daughter-in-law, who has given him birth, loves you and is better for you than seven sons" (4:15).

In Boaz' reference to Bethlehem's opinion of Ruth we see the merits of Gluckman's understanding of gossip as a form of group sanction by which public opinion enforces conformity to community values. But rather than the inhabitants of Bethlehem having a negative view of Ruth and criticising her departure from group norms, they think highly of her and this gives comfort to Boaz that he might marry her without risk to his reputation. He immediately proceeds to tell that he will redeem her, meaning marry her, so long as another person closer in kin with the right of redemption does not exercise it (3:12-13). That Boaz knows about this other person and that he has a prior claim further substantiates his having already given thought to marrying Ruth.

The relevance of Gluckman's view also surfaces in the thought that came to Boaz when she was leaving:

So she lay at his feet until the morning, but got up before a man could recognize his neighbor; and he thought (*rm*) *yw*), "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor" (3:14).⁸¹

Once again the power of community opinion and values is in play. Boaz fears

⁸⁰ Noted by Nielsen, *Ruth*, 77.

⁸¹ Here *rm*) *yw* is translated "and he thought" (not "and he said") because his use of the expression "the woman" indicates that he is not speaking to Ruth but musing to himself.

that the reputation, probably of both himself and Ruth, would be damaged if it were known that she had spent the night with him, which would be interpreted as having had sex with him. It is worth noting that Naomi does not seem to have entertained this concern herself, since her instructions to Ruth (3:1-4) did not include advice to avoid being seen by anyone coming or going. Perhaps she thought that Boaz would have to marry her if he had sex with Ruth on the threshing-floor. The scene ends with Boaz sending Ruth off with six measures of barley in her cloak (3:15).

Boaz at the Town Gate (4:1-12)

The final example of how gossip in the text propels the story-line occurs when Boaz acts to secure his marriage to Ruth. Seated at the town gate, Boaz explains to the kinsman with the closer claim on Ruth in the presence of ten of the town's elders that Naomi is selling the portion of the land that had belonged to Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon (4:1-3; 9). He then adds:

So I thought that I would tell you (literally: “disclose to your ears”) and say “Buy it in the presence of those sitting here ... If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me ...” (4:4).

The reference to this land comes as a surprise; this is the first mention of it in the text. Equally surprising and new is that Naomi is selling the land. Plainly, the closer kinsman was unaware of Naomi's intention to sell it—that is why Boaz has to tell him. In other words, Boaz possesses valuable information concerning an absent third party, here Naomi, unknown to this other kinsman.

Boaz has access to gossip, which he deploys to his advantage, that the other kinsman does not. It matters not whether Boaz has obtained this information from women to whom Naomi revealed it or from Naomi herself—which is not impossible, given her confidence in telling Ruth that Boaz was going to sort out that whole matter on that very day (3:18). However he acquired this information, it is gossip in the sense of “the exchange of information about absent third parties.”

Boaz is artful in arranging a flow of information to himself on critical matters, firstly concerning Ruth’s character, then the existence of a closer relative with the right of redemption and now the fact that Naomi, his kinswoman by marriage, plans to sell her husband’s property in Bethlehem. In this regard Boaz resembles Paine’s individual gossipier, who carefully engages in informal communication and information-management to forward and protect the interests of himself and his sub-group, here his affinal kin, Naomi and Ruth. Since the other kinsman was no doubt at the centre of another web of kin relations, in Bethlehem we see a community comparable with the coterie of rival interest-based sub-groups described by Paine where gossip is used by individuals in one sub-group to secure advantages in relation to the others. The information that Boaz has obtained about Naomi’s intended sale of the properties allows him to orchestrate his victory over the other kinsman, in that he is able to plan ahead how he will link the acquisition of the property to marriage with Ruth in a way that the other man would find unpalatable.

IV. CONCLUSION

In terms of literary genre as viewed by Northrop Frye, the Book of Ruth is close to that of a comedy: "The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character in it."⁸² Many comedies involve an initially difficult situation for the characters that is resolved during the course of the plot so that a happy ending ensues, typically in the form of a marriage; here, very necessary for a successful resolution in this ancient social context, we also have the birth of a child. An important means by which the plot of the Book of Ruth is propelled to this conclusion is that of gossip. In the text we observe phenomena closely comparable with of the dominant theoretical approaches to gossip: first, following Max Gluckman, as a system of social control and, secondly, following Robert Paine, as a form of information-management, of informal communication intended to forward and protect individual interests that serves as a catalyst for social processes. Paine's approach is the more illuminating, given the extent to which the appeal that Ruth has on Boaz from the outset depends on his use of gossip he has derived from women or women's networks in Bethlehem. He has also learned, possibly by gossip, that Naomi is selling her husband's property. At the same time, however, we witness the force of gossip as an agent of social control in a positive sense, in that the fact that the community in Bethlehem has come to a positive view of Ruth strengthens his confidence in marrying her, but also in a negative sense, in his fear of the consequences if it is learned that Ruth has visited him on the threshing-floor at night. On either approach, however, we are able to discover an important means by which this text works as a narrative. There

⁸² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 43.

is more to the unfolding story of Ruth than the role of gossip, but gossip, nevertheless, plays a major role.

